might bring relief, even if it departed from traditional Confucian principles. Xunzi was an activist; he longed for a government post, but was no more successful than Confucius and Mencius. He was three times appointed master of the Jixia Academy, but had to leave Qi when its tyrannical King Min expelled the scholars from his kingdom. In 255, he moved to Chu, where the prime minister made him a magistrate, but he lost his post in 238 when his patron was assassinated. Sadly, Xunzi retired from public life, and edited his collected essays.

One of these described his visit to Qin. Even though the Legalist ideal could not have been further from his own, Xunzi was impressed with what he saw. The officials worked with efficiency and integrity; there was no corruption, no infighting in the administration, and the ordinary people were simple and unspoiled. They may have feared the government, but they obeyed it, and appreciated the stability and impartiality of the new laws.[14] Qin was not perfect, however. Xunzi realized that the reforms had only been possible because the people had no experience of high civilization. He believed that the harsh penal code was probably necessary, but he also noted that Qin was a troubled place; people seemed constantly afraid that "the world will unite to crush it."[15] Qin would never rule the whole of China, he believed, because its draconian style of government would alienate the subjects of other states; it would survive only if it accepted the guidance of a *junzi*, a mature and humane ruler. Xunzi was both right and wrong. Qin did manage to defeat the other states and establish an empire, but its ruthless methods of government resulted in the collapse of the dynasty, which fell after a mere fourteen years.

Nevertheless, Qin was a challenge to a Confucian. During an audience with King Zhao, Xunzi told him that he was sorry that there were no ritualists in the Qin administration. The king replied bluntly: "The Confucians [*ru*] are no use in running a state."[16] Given their dismal track record, it was difficult for Xunzi to argue with him. Nor could he find an effective answer to his ambitious young pupil Li Si. Xunzi had suggested that if a *junzi* came to power, there would be peace, because his morality (*yi*) and benevolence (*ren*) would be an irresistible force for good. It

was a beautiful Confucian vision. The prince's compassion would radiate from him, like the potency of the sage kings, Xunzi explained; wherever he went, he would effortlessly transform his environment. Such a prince would never attack another state simply to further his own ambition.

> He takes up arms in order to put an end to violence, and so do away with harm, not in order to compete with others for spoil. Therefore when the soldiers of the benevolent man encamp they command a godlike respect; and where they pass, they transform the people. They are like the seasonable rain in whose falling all men rejoice.

"Dream on!" Li Si exclaimed. How did Xunzi explain the success of Qin, which had been consistently victorious for four generations? "Its armies are the strongest in the world and its authority sways the other feudal lords. It did not do this by *ren* and *yi* but by taking advantage of its opportunities—that's all."[17] Not long afterward, Li Si abandoned Xunzi, converted to Legalism, emigrated to Qin, became its prime minister, and presided over the lightning campaign that resulted in Qin's final victory in 221.

In 260, a few years after Xunzi's visit, the army of Qin conquered Xunzi's native state of Zhao. Even though the prince surrendered, the Qin troops massacred four hundred thousand Zhao soldiers. How could a *junzi*, who could not even keep a minor post in the administration, exert any restraining influence over such a ruthless regime? But as the political situation darkened, and more states adopted the Legalist system, Xunzi never lost faith. Against all odds, he continued to believe that the "yielding" spirit of the rituals and the compassionate ethic of *ren* could bring peace and order to China, even though he admitted that, in these hard times, they would probably have to be backed up by punishments and rewards. Sagehood was not an impossible ideal. If he made a passionate and committed effort to transform himself, any man in the street could become like Yao and save the world.

Throughout the *Xunzi*, we find an insistent plea for *yu wei*,

disciplined, conscious effort. Xunzi had learned from his visit to Qin that if they tried hard enough, human beings could turn their society around. But they must take responsibility for themselves. Heaven was not a god who intervened in the affairs of the world. It was no use relying on Heaven for help, or trying to bend Heaven's will by consulting oracles. Xunzi hated these old manipulative superstitions. Heaven was nature itself; the Way of Heaven could be seen in the order and regularity of the heavenly bodies and the succession of the seasons. Heaven's Way was entirely separate from human beings. It could give them no guidance or help, but it had made available the resources they needed to find their own path. This was the mission of the *junzi*. It was pointless to contemplate the Way of Heaven and neglect human affairs, as Zhuangzi had done. It was wrong to withdraw from society. Civilization was a magnificent achievement; it had given human beings divine status, and made them equal partners with Heaven and Earth. "Is it better to obey Heaven and sing hymns to it," Xunzi asked, "or to grasp the mandate of Heaven and make use of it?" Was it better to yearn for Heaven, like the Daoists, or to make use of the resources that Heaven had provided and "bring them to completion"?[18] If we concentrated on Heaven and neglected what man could do, Xunzi insisted again and again, "we fail to understand the nature of things."[19]

But this involved hard, dedicated effort. Xunzi had learned from the Legalists that people needed to be reformed. Unlike Mencius, he believed that human nature was not good but evil. Everybody, he said, "is born with feelings of envy and hate, and if he indulges these, they will lead him into violence and crime, and all sense of loyalty and good faith will disappear."[20] He used the same imagery as the Legalists: "A warped piece of wood must wait until it has been laid against the straightening board, steamed and forced into shape, before it can become straight."[21] But if he worked hard enough, anybody could become a sage. He could not achieve this alone; first he must find a teacher and submit himself to the rites (*li*): only then would he be able to observe the dictates of courtesy and humility, obey the rules of society and achieve order.[22] It was no good doing what came naturally, like

Yangists and Daoists. Goodness was the result of conscious en-
deavor. The *Junzi* used artifice to redirect his passions into con-
structive channels. This would not warp human nature, but bring
out its full potential.

Xunzi was convinced that if they used their intelligence and
reasoning powers, people would realize that the only way to re-
store peace and good order was to create a moral society. Educa-
tion was crucial. He took a leaf out of the Legalists' book by
admitting that the less intelligent would not understand this, and
would have to be compelled, by a judicious system of law and
punishments, to submit to a program of moral education. But
wiser people would voluntarily choose to transform themselves
by studying the wisdom of the past. When Yao, Shun, and Yu had
contemplated the world, they realized that they could end the in-
tolerable misery they saw all around them only by a massive intel-
lectual effort that began with the transformation of their own
selves. So they created the rituals of reverence, courtesy, and
"yielding" (*rang*). These moderated their unruly passions, so that
they achieved inner peace. By looking into their own hearts, crit-
ically observing their behavior, and observing their own reactions
to life's pain and joy, the sages discovered how to order social re-
lations.[23] The *li* were thus based on the principle of *shu*, "likening
to oneself." Only when a ruler had mastered himself could he
bring peace and order to society as a whole.

The sages had not imposed a set of alien rules on their subjects,
therefore; the *li* had been inspired by their analysis of humanity. The
rites humanized the emotions, shaping them as an artist brought
form and beauty out of unpromising materials: they "trim what is
too long, and stretch out what is too short, eliminate surplus and re-
pair deficiency, extend the forms of love and reverence, and step by
step, bring to fulfillment the beauties of proper conduct."[24] The *li*
were a kind of natural law. The universe itself had to obey rules that
brought order out of potential chaos. Even the heavenly bodies and
the four seasons had to "yield" instead of encroaching aggressively
upon one another. "Heaven and Earth are harmonised by the *li*, the
sun and moon are illuminated by it; the four seasons derive their
order from it; the stars and planets move by it," Xunzi pointed out.

If they did not, there would be chaos. The same *li*, which demanded that all things observe their due place in the order of the cosmos, would purify human emotions.[25] So far from being unnatural, the *li* would take people to the heart of reality. "The meaning of ritual is deep indeed," Xunzi repeated emphatically. "He who tries to enter it with the uncouth and inane theories of the system-makers will perish there."[26]

Even though Xunzi concentrated on earth rather than Heaven, he was not a secular humanist. Like all Chinese, he revered nature as "godlike" (*shen*). His religious rationalism was based on mystical silence. He deplored what he called "obsession," the egotistic insistence on a single doctrinal position. Before anybody attempted to reform society, he must understand the Way, and he could not do that by insisting that his opinions were right and everybody else's wrong. The Way could be comprehended only by a mind that was "empty, unified and still." Here Xunzi was entirely in agreement with Zhuangzi. The mind was "empty" if it remained open to new impressions, instead of clinging to its *own* opinion; it was "unified" if it did not force the complexity of life into a coherent, self-serving system; it was "still" if it did not indulge in "dreams and noisy fantasies," and nurture ambitious "plots and schemes" that hindered true understanding.[27] "Emptiness, unity and stillness," Xunzi explained, "these are the qualities of a great and pure enlightenment."

Divested of egotistic obsession, an ordinary human being could achieve the panoptic vision of a sage. Instead of being imprisoned in a parochially selfish point of view, he acquired an intuitive grasp of the deeper principles of government.

> He who has such enlightenment may sit in his room and view the entire area within the four seas, may dwell in the present and yet discourse on distant ages. He has a penetrating insight into all beings and understands their true nature, studies the ages of order and disorder and comprehends the principle behind them. He surveys all Heaven and Earth, governs all beings, and masters the great principle and all that is in the universe.[28]

His intelligence had become "godlike" (*shen*). The Legalists had not been ambitious enough. A reformed person was not simply a cog in the economic or military machine, but a divine being. "Broad and vast—who knows the limits of such a man?" Xunzi asked. "Brilliant and comprehensive—who knows his virtue? Shadowy and ever changing—who knows his form? His brightness matches the sun and moon; his greatness fills the eight directions. Such is the Great Man."[29] A man who had fulfilled the potential of his humanity in this way could save the world.

Nobody took Xunzi's political ideas very seriously, but by the middle of the third century, everybody was talking about another mystical manual of statecraft that immediately attracted widespread attention.[30] The Legalists in particular warmed to this new text. The *Daodejing* (*Classic of the Way and Its Potency*) has become a popular devotional classic in the West, even though it was not originally written for a private individual but for the ruler of a small state. We know very little indeed about its author, who wrote under the pseudonym Laozi, "Old Master." Various stories circulated about him, none of which have much historical validity, and the author, whose theme is anonymity and selflessness, has eluded us, as he probably would have wished.

The *Daodejing* consists of eighty-one small chapters, written in enigmatic verse. Even though Laozi was far more spiritual than the Legalists, there was an affinity between them, which the Legalists spotted immediately. Both despised the Confucians; both had a paradoxical view of the world, in which goals could be achieved only by pursuing their opposites; and both believed that the ruler should "do nothing" and intervene as little as possible in the life of the state. Unlike the Legalists, Laozi wanted his king to be virtuous, but not like a Confucian sage, who was endlessly trying to *do* things for his people. Instead, a prince who practiced the self-effacement and total impartiality of *wu wei* would bring the violence of the Warring States period to an end. The ancient kings, it was said, had ruled by the magical potency that established the Way of Heaven on earth by performing a series of external ceremonies. Laozi internalized these old rites, and advised

the princes to acquire an interior, spiritualized conformity with the Way.

These were terrifying times for the small principalities, which were about to be obliterated by Qin. The fear of imminent annihilation runs like a leitmotif through the *Daodejing*, which offers the vulnerable prince a stratagem for survival. Instead of posturing aggressively, he must retreat and make himself small. Instead of plotting and scheming, he must abandon thought, calm his mind, relax his body, and free himself of conventional ways of looking at the world. He must allow his problems to solve themselves by the discipline of *wu wei*.[31] But this could be achieved only if he reformed his own heart, which must be rooted in stillness and emptiness. That is why Laozi devoted thirty chapters of his book to the mystical discipline that would transform the interior life of the prince and give him the power to replenish and restore the world, as the ancient kings had done.

The very first chapter introduces us to Laozi's method. The sage ruler had to learn to think in an entirely different way. Ordinary rational thought would be useless: doctrines, theories, and systems could only impede his progress, because he had to enter a dimension that existed beyond language and concepts. Hence Laozi began:

> *The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way;*
> *The name that can be named is not the constant name.*
> *The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth.*

Everything in the world has a name, but Laozi was speaking of what was beyond the mundane and more fundamental than anything we could conceive: it was, therefore, nameless and unseen. But most people were unaware of this hidden dimension. It could be known only by the person who had rid himself forever of desire. Somebody who had never eliminated desire from his mind and heart could see only the manifestation of this nameless reality—the visible, phenomenal world. The unseen and the manifest, however, were both rooted in a still deeper level of being, the se-

cret essence of all things, the "Mystery upon mystery." What should we call this? Perhaps, Laozi concluded, we should call it the Dark, to remind ourselves of its profound obscurity: "the gateway of the manifold secrets!"[32]

Laozi revealed ever deeper tiers of reality, as though he were peeling the layers of an onion. Before he could begin his quest, the sage ruler had to understand the inadequacy of language; just as he thought that he had glimpsed the unseen, he was made aware of a still deeper mystery. Next, he was warned that this knowledge was not a matter of acquiring privileged information; it demanded the kenosis upon which all the great Axial sages insisted. He had to give up the "desire" that constantly clamors "I want!" Even when he had realized this, he was still only at the "gateway" of the final mystery. In placing the Way at the center of his vision, Laozi emphasized the fluidity of the spiritual life; the goal was hidden and inaccessible, and the path always had a fresh twist or turn, constantly urged us further, at the same time as it receded into the distance:

> *There is a thing confusedly formed,*
> *Born before heaven and earth,*
> *Silent and void*
> *It stands alone and does not change,*
> *Goes round and does not weary.*
> *It is capable of being the mother of the world.*
> *I know not its name*
> *So I style it "the way."*
> *I give it the makeshift name of "the great."*
> *Being great, it is further described as receding.*[33]

There was insouciance in Laozi's attempt to name this elusive, recessive "thing" to which he would give only a "makeshift" name. We could not talk about this "thing," but if we modeled ourselves upon it, it became—somehow—known to us.

Laozi's elliptical poems made no logical sense. He deliberately confused his readers by pelting them with paradox. He told them that the sublime was nameless, and yet a few lines later he said

that the "named" and the "nameless" came from the same source.
The sage ruler was supposed to hold these contradictions in his
heart and become aware of the inadequacy of his ordinary
thought processes. Laozi's chapters were not speculations, but
points for meditation. He wrote down only the conclusions, and
did not trace the steps that led to these insights, because the sage
ruler had to journey down the Way by himself, going from the
manifest to the unseen, and finally to the darkest of the dark. He
could not achieve these insights at second hand, relying on other
people's reports of the Way. The Chinese had their own form of
yoga (*zuo-wang*), which taught them to shut out the outside
world and close down their ordinary modes of perception.
Zhuangzi had called this "forgetting," the discarding of knowl-
edge. Laozi occasionally referred to these yogic disciplines,[34] but
did not describe them in any detail; they were, however, essential
to the mystical process he outlined. The only way the reader
could evaluate his conclusions was to make the journey.

Laozi often called the unseen reality "the Void," because it could not be defined, a name that suggested an emptiness that the busy *yu wei* mind feared. Our nature abhors a vacuum, and we fill our minds with ideas, words, and thoughts that seem to be full of life but take us nowhere. In the *Daodejing,* however, the Void is also called the Womb of all being, because it brings forth new life.[35] Laozi's images of the Void, the Valley, and the Hollow all speak of something that is not there. Besides pointing to the indescribable mystery of being, they also point to the kenosis of the *wu wei* mind, once the ego has been lost. There must be a void in the being of the sage ruler. In the trance of meditation, he could experience the "emptiness" that, according to Laozi, was a return to the authentic humanity that people had enjoyed before they were infected by civilization, which had introduced a false artifice into human life. By interfering with nature, human beings had lost their Way.

While other creatures kept to the Way designed for them, humans had separated themselves from their *dao* by constant, busy *yu wei* reflection: they made distinctions that did not exist, and formulated solemn principles of action that were simply egotistical

projections. Laozi agreed with Zhuangzi about this. When the sage trained himself to lay aside these mental habits, he could return to his original nature, and get back on the right path.

I do my utmost to attain emptiness;
I hold firmly to stillness.
The myriad creatures all rise together
And I watch their return.
The teeming creatures
All return to their separate roots.
Returning to one's roots is known as stillness.[36]

Everything else returned to its origins, in the same way as the leaves fell to the roots of the tree, became compost, and reentered the cycle of life. The leaves had emerged from the unseen world, had become manifest for a while, and then returned to the dark. The enlightened sage ruler stood aloof from this flux. Once he had aligned himself with the unseen, he attained perfect wisdom and impartiality. He can identify himself with the Way, the poem concluded; "he can endure, and to the end of his days will meet with no danger."[37]

Emptiness brought a release from the fear that pervaded the *Daodejing*. The ruler who dreaded annihilation was afraid of a chimera. We should not fear nothingness, because it was at the heart of reality. "The thirty spokes of the wheel share one hub," Laozi pointed out, "but it is where there is nothing [the hole for the axle] that the efficacy of the cart lies."[38] So too, when making a pot, we kneaded the clay into an attractive shape, but the raison d'être of the vessel was the place where there was nothing. Laozi concludes:

Thus we think we benefit from perceptible things
But it is where we perceive nothing that true efficacy lies.[39]

It was the same with public policy. Once he had discovered the fertile Void within himself, the prince was ready to rule. He had attained a "kingliness" modeled on Heaven and the *dao*.[40] The sage ruler must behave like Heaven, which pursued its own inscrutable

course without interfering with the Ways of other creatures. This is the Way things ought to be, and this—not ceaseless, purposeful activism—would bring peace to the world.

Everywhere rulers, politicians, and administrative officials were plotting and scheming. Many of the philosophers had done more harm than good. Mohists stressed the importance of analysis, strategy, and action. Confucians glorified the culture that, Laozi believed, had interrupted the flow of the *dao*. The Confucian heroes Yao, Shun, and Yu had constantly meddled with nature—by directing the flow of rivers, and setting fire to forests and mountains to create arable land. By imposing their rituals on society, Confucians had encouraged people to concentrate on a purely external spirituality. There was far too much goal-directed, *yu wei* activity; it was incompatible with the gentle, unassertive and spontaneous course of the Way, which let creatures alone:

> *The way never acts, yet nothing is left undone.*
> *Should lords and princes be able to hold on to it,*
> *The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.*

And, the Daoist ruler concluded: "If I cease to desire and remain still, the empire will be at peace of its own accord."[41]

The secret of survival was to act counterintuitively.[42] In political life, people always preferred frenzied activity to doing nothing, knowledge to ignorance, and strength to weakness, but—to the astonishment of his contemporaries, who were intrigued with this novel idea[43]—Laozi insisted that they should do the exact opposite.

> *In the world there is nothing more submissive and*
> *weak than water*
> *Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing*
> *can surpass it.*
> *This is because there is nothing that can take its place.*
> *That the weak overcomes the strong,*
> *And the submissive overcomes the hard,*
> *Everyone in the world knows, yet no one can put this*
> *knowledge into practice.*[44]

All human effort was directed against passivity, so to do the opposite of what was expected by the aggressively scheming politicians was to return to the spontaneity of the Way.[45] It was a law of nature that everything that went up must come down, so in strengthening your enemy by submission, you actually hastened his decline. The reason why Heaven and Earth endured forever was precisely because they did not struggle to prolong their existence:

> *Therefore the sage puts his person last and comes first. . . .*
> *Is it not because he is without thought of self that he is able to accomplish his private ends?*[46]

Such self-emptying required a long mystical training, but once the sage ruler had achieved this interior void, he would become as vital, fluid, and fecund as the so-called weaker things of life.

Force and coercion were inherently self-destructive. Here Laozi returned to the spirit of the ancient rituals of warfare, which had urged the warriors to "yield" to the enemy. "Arms are ill-omened instruments, and are not the instruments of the sage," Laozi maintained. "He uses them only when he cannot do otherwise."[47] Sometimes war was a regrettable necessity, but if he was forced to fight, the sage must always take up his weapons with regret. There must be no egotistic triumphalism, no cruel chauvinism, and no facile patriotism. The sage must not intimidate the world with a show of arms, because this belligerence would almost certainly recoil on him. The sage must always try to bring a military expedition to an end. "Bring it to a conclusion, but do not boast; bring it to a conclusion, but do not brag; bring it to a conclusion, but do not be arrogant; bring it to a conclusion, but only where there is no choice; bring it to a conclusion, but do not intimidate."[48]

Wu wei, therefore, did not mean total abstinence from action, but an unaggressive, unassertive attitude that prevented the escalation of hatred.

The good leader in war is not warlike
The good fighter is not impetuous;
The best conqueror of the enemy is he who never
takes the offensive.
The man who gets the most out of men is the one
who treats them with humility.[49]

This, Laozi concluded, "is what I call the virtue [*de*] of non-violence," and by acting in this way, Laozi concluded, the sage warrior "matched the sublimity of Heaven."[50]

It was our attitude, not our action, that determined the outcome of what we did. People were always able to sense the feeling and motivation that lay behind our words and deeds. The sage must learn to absorb hostility; if he retaliated to an atrocity there would certainly be a fresh attack. Challenges must be ignored. "To yield is to be preserved whole. . . . Because [the sage] does not contend, no one in the world is in a position to contend with him."[51] Tyrants were digging their own grave, because when a prince tried to act upon other human beings, they automatically resisted him, and the result was usually the opposite of what was intended. *Wu wei* must be combined with humility. The sage did not trumpet his principles from the rooftops; indeed, he had no fixed opinions. The sage did not try to make the people become what *he* wanted them to be, but "takes as his own the mind of the people."[52] Laozi was convinced that human nature was originally kind and good. It had become violent only when people had felt coerced by elaborate laws and moral codes.[53] Whenever he encountered the aggression of a bigger state, the sage ruler must ask whether hatred was breeding more hatred, or whether it was weakening in response to compassion, a virtue that Laozi rarely mentioned explicitly but that was implicit in his striving to put himself in the place of the other:

The reason there is great affliction is that I have a self.
If I had no self, what affliction would I have?
Therefore to one who honours the world as his self

The world may be entrusted,
And to one who loves the world as one's self
The world may be consigned."

Laozi was the last great Chinese sage of the Axial Age. His was an essentially utopian ideal. It is difficult to see how a sage who had reached this level of "emptiness" would ever come to power, since he would be incapable of the calculation that was necessary to win office.[8] Like Mencius, Laozi may have nurtured some kind of messianic hope that the horrors of his time would impel the people to gravitate spontaneously toward a mystically inclined ruler. But, of course, it was not a Daoist sage but the Legalist state of Qin that ended the violence of the Warring States and unified the empire. This spectacular success seemed to prove that universal kingship could not be achieved without recourse to military power. It brought a peace of sorts, but spelt the death knell to the Axial hopes for morality, benevolence, and nonviolence. Under the empire, the Axial spiritualities would effect a synthesis and transmute into something quite different.

The Chinese were isolated from the other Axial peoples, so they knew nothing about the extraordinary career of Alexander the Great, Aristotle's old pupil, who conquered the Persian empire in 333 when he routed the army of Darius III at the river Issus in Cilicia. He then led his army on a rampage through Asia, creating an empire that included most of the known world. His progress had been violent and ruthless. He brooked no opposition, but mercilessly destroyed any cities that had the temerity to stand in his way and massacred their populations. His empire was based on fear, and yet Alexander had a vision of political and cultural unity. But the empire did not survive his early death in Babylonia in 323. Almost immediately fighting broke out among his leading generals, and for the next two decades the lands conquered by Alexander were devastated by the battles of these six *diadochoi* ("successors"). The "peace" of the empire had given way to de-

structive warfare. Finally, at the very end of the century, two of the *diadochoi* eliminated the others and divided Alexander's territories between them. Ptolemy, one of the most shrewd of Alexander's generals, took Egypt, the African coast, Palestine, and southern Syria, while Seleucus, who had been appointed satrap of Babylonia by Alexander, controlled large parts of the old Persian empire, including Iran. Seleucus settled the far eastern boundary by relinquishing the Indian territories, which proved impossible to maintain.

Alexander made little impression on the people of India. He conquered only a few minor tribes, and his invasion was not even mentioned by some of the early Indian historians. His achievement was not the conquest of India, but the feat of actually getting there, and his two years in India were more of a geographical expedition than a military campaign. Alexander seemed the embodiment of the Greek ethos. He had been brought up on the Homeric myths, inspired by the ideals of Athens, and tutored by Aristotle. Greece had not participated as fully in the religious vision of the Axial Age as the other regions. Some of its most startling "axial" achievements had been military. Alexander's two-year adventure in India was another such moment: a Greek army had reached what they regarded as the end of the earth. They had pitted themselves against the ultimate as bravely as the yogins had struggled to break through the limits of the human psyche. Where mystics had conquered interior space, Alexander explored the farthest reaches of the physical world. Like many of the Axial sages, he was constantly "straining after more."[56] He wanted to go farther into India than the Persian kings, and reach the ocean that, he believed, circled the earth. It was the kind of "enlightenment" that would always appeal to Western explorers[57] but very different from the *nibbana* or *moksha,* characterized by self-effacement, *ahimsa,* and compassion, sought by the Indian mystics.

The Greek soldiers were enthralled and terrified by the magnificence of India, with its fearsome monsoons, its astonishing war elephants, blazing summers, and intractable mountain passes. They were especially intrigued by the "naked philosophers" they encountered, who may have been Jains. But even though the Indi-

ans had no enduring interest in the Greeks, Alexander and his successors decisively changed the fortunes of some of the other peoples we have met in this book. The Zoroastrians of Iran remembered Alexander as the worst sinner in history, because he killed so many priests and scholars and stamped out so many of their sacred fires. He was the "accursed" (*guzustaq*), a title that he alone shares with the Hostile Spirit. The slaughter of the priests was an irreparable loss: Zoroastrian texts were still transmitted orally; many existed only in the minds of the murdered priests and could never be recovered.

The Jews were more affected by the *diadochoi* than by Alexander himself. Since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, Jerusalem had remained a backwater. It was not on any of the main trade routes; the caravans that stopped at Petra or Gaza had no reason to go to Jerusalem, which lacked the raw materials to develop its own industry. But during the wars of the *diadochoi,* Judea was continually invaded by one army after another, from Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt, with their baggage, equipment, families, and slaves. Jerusalem itself changed hands no less than six times between 320 and 301. The Jews of Jerusalem experienced the Greeks as destructive, violent, and militaristic. In 301, Judea, Samerina, Phoenicia, and the entire coastal plain were captured by the armies of Ptolemy I Soter, and for the next hundred years, Jerusalem remained under the control of the Ptolemies, who did not, however, interfere much in local affairs.

But the region was changing. Alexander and his successors founded new cities in the Near East, which became centers of Hellenistic learning and culture: Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria, and Pergamum in Asia Minor. These were Greek poleis, which usually excluded the native inhabitants and were built on a scale never seen before in the Hellenic world. This was the cosmopolis, the "world city." It was a great age of migration. Greeks no longer felt wedded to the small city-state of their birth. Alexander's heroic expedition had expanded their horizons, and many now felt that they were cosmopolitans, citizens of the world. Greeks became world travelers, as merchants, mercenaries, and ambassadors, and many began to find the polis petty and

provincial. Some founded new poleis in the Near East. Alexander had settled Macedonians in Samerina, and later Greek colonists also arrived in Syria and converted such ancient cities as Gaza, Shechem, Marissa, and Amman into poleis on the Hellenic model. Greek soldiers, merchants, and entrepreneurs settled in these Greek enclaves to take advantage of the new opportunities. The local people who learned to speak and write in Greek became "Hellenes" themselves, and were allowed to enter the lower ranks of the army and administration.

Hence there developed a clash of civilizations. Some of the locals were fascinated by Greek culture. Others were horrified by the secular tenor of polis life, the immoral activities of the Greek gods, and the spectacle of youths exercising naked in the gymnasia. Jews were divided in their response to the Greeks. In Alexandria, the Ptolemies refused to admit Egyptians to the gymnasium, but did allow foreigners to enter, so local Jews trained there and would achieve a unique fusion of Greek and Jewish culture. In Jerusalem, which was more conservative, two factions developed. One was led by the Tobiad clan, descendants of the Tobiah who had caused Nehemiah so much trouble. They felt at home in the Greek world, and became pioneers of the new ideas in Jerusalem. But others found this foreign influence extremely threatening, clung defensively to the old traditions, and gravitated toward the Oniads, a priestly family who were determined to maintain the old laws and customs. The third century is a shadowy period in the history of Jerusalem, but it seems that at this time the tension between the two camps remained under control. Later, however, after the end of the Axial Age, there was serious conflict, when some Jews tried to convert Jerusalem itself into a polis called "Antioch in Judea."

These turbulent years affected the history of Jerusalem in another way. There had been very few rebellions against imperial Persia. The Persian kings had propagated the myth that they had inherited an empire that would last forever: it had been inaugurated by the Assyrians, had then passed to the Babylonians, and finally, to Cyrus. Any revolt was, therefore, doomed. But as the people of the Near East watched the *diadochoi* battling for control

of the region, one succeeding another, their mood changed. The world had been turned upside down, and some Jews began to entertain hopes of independence under their own *messiach*. When in 201 the Ptolemies were ousted from Judea by the Seleucids, these hopes flared again. The behavior of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV in the second century resulted in a surge of Jewish apocalyptic passion, which drew on the ancient theology of the Davidic monarchy. But this messianic piety had no roots in the Axial Age, and took Judaism in a different, post-Axial direction.

Alexander had won his empire at the peak of Greek intellectual achievement and his career marked the beginning of a new era. After his death, some poleis on the Greek mainland, including Athens, revolted against Macedonian rule, and Antipater, one of the six original *diadochoi*, took savage reprisals. This finished Athenian democracy. As Greek migrants and colonists settled in the new territories, Greek civilization began to merge with the cultures of the east. Scholars of the nineteenth century called this fusion "Hellenism." The challenge of this encounter was enriching, but in the process the intensity of the Greek experiment became diluted. Spread thinly over such a huge, foreign area, it fragmented and became Greek*ish* rather than truly Greek. Any period of major social change is troubled. The collapse of the old order and the inevitable political disruption were disturbing.[58] There was widespread bewilderment and malaise. Personal and political autonomy had always been crucial to the Greeks' sense of identity, but now their world had expanded so dramatically that people felt that their destiny was controlled by vast impersonal forces.

During the third century, three new philosophies, rooted in the pain of the period, tried to assuage this sense of alienation.[59] Epicurus (341–270), for example, experienced very little security for the first thirty-five years of his life. His family was expelled from Samos by the Macedonians, and he wandered from one polis to another before arriving in Athens in 306. There he bought a house with a garden near the Academy, and founded a community of close friends. Pleasure, he taught, was the chief goal of human existence, but this did not mean, as his detractors assumed, that he flung himself into a hectic round of hedonistic delights. In fact,

the community adopted a quiet, simple regime in "the Garden." Pleasure did not consist in sensuality and self-indulgence, but in *ataraxia* ("freedom from pain"). Epicureans shunned all mental disturbances. Life in the polis was so tense and unpredictable that those who had the means should withdraw from public affairs and enjoy a peaceful existence with congenial people. They must avoid anything that caused them distress, including the superstitious belief in fickle deities who inflicted such great suffering on hapless men and women. Above all, Epicureans should not allow their mortality to poison their minds. They must realize that death was simply the extinction of consciousness, "seeing that when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist," Epicurus pointed out. It was pointless to worry about it. "A correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding infinite time, but by ridding us of the desire for immortality."[60]

At the same time that Epicurus and his friends were enjoying retirement in the Garden, Zeno (342–270), a Hellenized Phoenician from Cyprus, was teaching in the Painted Stoa, a porch in the Athenian agora. Hence he and his followers were known as Stoics. Zeno had been greatly inspired by the extraordinary moment when Alexander had seemed to unite the world under his rule. The cosmos, he believed, was a unity. There was no split between body and spirit; the whole of reality was physical, animated, and organized by a sort of fiery, vaporous breath, which he called the Logos ("Reason"), the Pneuma ("Spirit"), or God. This intelligent, divine force pervaded everything. It was wholly immanent. Human beings could achieve happiness only by living in accordance with the rational Logos, which was revealed in the natural order. Freedom consisted in surrender to the will of God; since God had predetermined everything, it was useless to rebel against fate. The correct attitude was one of resigned acquiescence. Stoics should travel lightly through life, indifferent to their external circumstances. They must cultivate an inner peace, avoid all occasions of disquiet, do their duty conscientiously, conduct themselves with sobriety, and avoid all extremes. The objective

was to live in harmony with the inexorable processes of the divine Logos, not to work against them.

Ataraxia was also the goal of Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365–275), founder of the Skeptics. We know very little about him. He wrote nothing and indeed no Skeptical texts were produced until about five hundred years after his death. Pyrrho seems to have insisted that it was impossible to be certain about anything, so the best way to live at peace was to suspend judgment. People who were dogmatic and self-assertive were doomed to unhappiness. "Nothing is honourable or base or just or unjust," he is reported to have said. "Convention and habit are the basis of everything that men do, for each thing is no more this than that."[61] This was inconsistent, of course. If it was true that we knew nothing, how could Pyrrho know that even this was true—or evolve a philosophy at all? But Pyrrho apparently saw Skepticism as a therapy, not as an epistemological theory. People became too agitated by their strong opinions; they were too anxious to discover the truth. So a Skeptic would kindly undermine their certainty, flushing all this intellectual turmoil out of their systems. Sextus Empiricus, the first Skeptical writer, who lived in the third century CE, explained that Pyrrho and his disciples began by trying to find truth in order to gain peace of mind. But when they were unable to achieve this to their satisfaction, they gave up and immediately felt much better. "When they suspended judgement, tranquillity followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body."[62] So they became known as *skeptikoi* ("inquirers") because they were still looking, had not closed their minds, but had learned that an uncluttered attitude, open to all possibilities, was the secret of happiness.

The Axial Age was well and truly over for these Hellenistic philosophers, and yet in their work we find ghostly relics of the great pioneering spiritualities that sages and prophets had been exploring for more than five hundred years. The heroic striving of Confucius, the Buddha, Ezekiel, and Socrates had been replaced by a more modest, attainable, and, as it were, "budget" version. In Zeno's ideal of a life attuned to nature, there was a hint of Daoism, but instead of yearning to change the world by aligning him-

self with the natural process, the Stoic simply resigned himself to the status quo. There is a fatalism in all these third-century Greek philosophies that was anathema to the Axial Age. The Buddha had warned his disciples not to become attached to metaphysical opinions; the mystics of the Upanishads had reduced their interlocutors to silence by pointing out the fallacy of rational thought, but they had not simply "suspended judgement" like the Skeptics. They had used the experience of dismantling ordinary habits of thought to give people intimations of a mystery that lay beyond words and conceptual ideas. The renouncers of India had left the world behind, but not to live in the suburban Epicurean Garden, and the Buddha had insisted that his monks must return to the agora and practice compassion for all living beings.

Herein lay the difference. These Hellenistic philosophers made no heroic ethical demands. They all claimed to lay aside the abstruse metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle and go back to Socrates, who had tried to teach men how to live. They wanted the peace of mind that Socrates had possessed when he had faced his unjust death with equanimity. They were also popularizers like Socrates, who had talked to everybody, learned and uneducated alike. But Socrates had never claimed that a human being's sole aim should be to eliminate disturbance. Zeno, Epicurus, and Pyrrho all wanted a quiet life and were determined to avoid the extremity and striving of the great Axial philosophers. They simply wanted *ataraxia*, to be trouble-free. The Axial sages all pointed out that existence was inherently unsatisfactory and painful, and wanted to transcend this suffering. But they were not content merely to avoid distress and stop caring about anything or anybody; they had insisted that salvation lay in facing up to suffering, not retreating into denial. In Epicurus's sequestered Garden, there is more than a hint of the Buddha's pleasure park. The similarity becomes more pointed when we reflect that most Epicureans had private means to finance their retreat, which would not have been available to the hoi polloi.

Instead of seeking *ataraxia*, the Axial thinkers had forced their contemporaries to accept the reality of pain. Jeremiah had denounced those who retreated into denial as "false prophets." The

tragedians of Athens had put suffering onstage and commanded the audience to weep. You could achieve liberation only by going through sorrow, not by going to elaborate lengths to make sure that it never impinged on your protected existence. The experience of *dukkha* was a prerequisite for enlightenment, because it enabled the aspirant to empathize with the grief of others. But the Hellenistic philosophies were entirely focused on the self. True, the Stoics were urged to take part in public life and work generously for the good of others. But they were not allowed to empathize with the people they served, because that would disturb their equilibrium. This cold self-sufficiency was alien to the Axial Age. Friendship and kindness were crucial to Epicurus's commune, but they were not extended outside the Garden. And however kindly intentioned, there was more than a hint of aggression in the Skeptics' therapy, as they went around picking arguments with other people in order to undermine their convictions. The approach was markedly different from that of the Buddha and Socrates, who always started from where their interlocutors actually were, not where they thought they ought to be.

Many Axial thinkers were mistrustful of pure *logos* and reason, but the Hellenistic philosophies were based on science rather than intuition. Epicurus, for example, developed the atomism of Democritus to show that it was a waste of the precious lives we had to fear death, which would inevitably occur when the atoms fell apart. It was pointless to ask the gods for help, because they too were composed of and ruled by the atoms. The Stoics taught that it was possible to align yourself with the divine process of nature only if you understood scientifically that it was programmed by the Logos and could not be altered. The third century was the great age of Greek science. The new Hellenistic kingdoms of Ptolemy and Seleucus were far richer than the old poleis, and kings vied with one another to attract scholars to their capitals, bribing them with grants and salaries. Euclid and Archimedes both lived and worked in Alexandria. The Milesian and Eleatic philosophers had concentrated on those aspects of natural science that related to human beings, rather like popular scientists today, whereas the new scientists of the third century were at the cutting

edge of mathematics, physics, astronomy, and engineering. Science had now lost its early religious orientation and become a wholly secular pursuit.

The Hellenistic philosophies did not affect the old pagan religion: sacrifices, festivals, and rituals continued without interruption. The mysteries became even more popular, and were often combined with congenial eastern cults. In 399, Socrates had been executed for turning people away from the traditional gods. After the fourth century, no philosopher was persecuted for his religious views, even though Epicurus, Zeno, and Pyrrho attempted to discredit the old beliefs. There was a new tolerance that was never officially endorsed by the establishment, but that gained ground among the elite.[63] Most people continued to practice the ancient rites, which remained largely untouched by the Axial Age and would remain in place until Christianity was forcibly imposed as the state religion in the fifth century CE.

The Hellenistic philosophers may not have been as revolutionary as their predecessors, but they had lasting influence, and in many ways they epitomized the emerging Western spirit. In the West, people gravitated toward science and *logos,* and were less spiritually ambitious than the sages of India and China. Instead of making the heroic effort to discover a realm of transcendent peace within, the Hellenistic philosophers were prepared to settle for a quiet life. Instead of training the intuitive powers of the mind, they turned to scientific *logos.* Instead of achieving mystical enlightenment, the West was excited by a more mundane illumination. The Western genius for science eventually transformed the world, and in the sixteenth century its scientific revolution introduced a new Axial Age. This would greatly benefit humanity, but it was inspired by a different species of genius. Instead of the Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius, the heroes of the second Axial Age would be Newton, Freud, and Einstein.

A new empire had also been established in India, but it was very different from Alexander's. Magadha had dominated the Ganges

Valley since the fourth century, and had greatly expanded its territory under the powerful Nanda dynasty. But in 321, Chandragupta Maurya, a *vaishya* who may have come from one of the tribal republics, seized the throne, having already established a power base in the Punjab, where the Greeks' departure had left a power vacuum. We know very little about either his reign or his military campaign, but the Mauryan empire eventually extended from Bengal to Afghanistan, and Chandragupta then began to penetrate central and southern India. Coming from the more peripheral tribal states, the Mauryan emperors had no strong links with Vedic religion, and were more interested in the nonorthodox sects. Chandragupta himself favored the Jains, who accompanied his army and established themselves in the south. His son Bindusara Maurya promoted the Ajivakas, while the third emperor, Ashoka, who succeeded to the throne in 268, patronized the Buddhists, and his brother Vitashoka actually became a Buddhist monk. Pali sources claim that before his conversion, Ashoka had been a cruel, self-indulgent ruler, who managed to win the throne only by killing his other brothers. On his accession, he assumed the title Devanampiya, "the Beloved of the Gods," and continued to conquer new territory until he suffered a severe shock.

In 260 the Mauryan army conquered Kalinga in the region of modern Orissa. Ashoka recorded his victory in an edict, which he had inscribed on a massive rock face. He said nothing about his military strategy, and instead of celebrating his victory, he dwelt on the tragic number of casualties. One hundred thousand Kalingan soldiers had been killed during the battle; "many times that number" perished afterward from wounds and hunger, and 150,000 Kalingans had been deported. Ashoka was devastated by the spectacle of such suffering. The "Beloved of the Gods," he said, felt remorse,

> for when an independent country is conquered, the slaughter, death and deportation is extremely grievous to *Devanampiya* and weighs heavily on his mind. . . . Even those who were fortunate enough to have es-

caped, and whose love is undiminished, suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues and relatives. . . . Today if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on the mind of *Dev. anampiya.*[64]

The purpose of the edict was to warn other kings against undertaking further wars of conquest. If they did lead a campaign, it must be fought humanely, and victory should be implemented "with patience and light punishment." The only true conquest was *dhamma*, by which Ashoka meant a moral effort that would benefit people in this life and the next.[65]

This was a significant moment. The *Arthashastra*, a manual of statecraft composed by the Brahmin Kautilya, the mentor of Chandragupta Maurya, made it clear that the conquest of neighboring territories was one of the king's sacred duties. Ashoka, however, proposed to replace military might with *ahimsa*. There is some doubt about the details of this incident. Ashoka probably exaggerated the casualty figures: the Mauryan army was only sixty thousand strong, so it is hard to see how it could have killed a hundred thousand Kalingans. It was well disciplined and did not usually harass noncombatants. If Ashoka was so distressed by the plight of the deportees, why did he not simply repatriate them? He may have wanted to deter rebellion by emphasizing the magnitude and ruthlessness of his victory, and he certainly did not abjure all warfare from that day forward. In other edicts, Ashoka admitted that war was sometimes necessary, and never disbanded his army.[66]

But perhaps this is to expect too much. It is clear that Ashoka was truly shaken by the violence and suffering in Kalinga, and that he tried to introduce a policy based on *dhamma*. He now ruled an Indian kingdom of unprecedented size. Throughout the length and breadth of his territory he inscribed edicts outlining his innovative policy on cliff faces and pillars. They were prominently sited and probably read aloud to the populace on state occasions.

Written in Pali, inscribed with animal figures and such motifs as the Buddhists' wheel, each one begins, "Thus speaks the Beloved of the Gods," and preaches a humane ethic of nonviolence and moral reform. The extent of these edicts is amazing: it is comparable to finding identical runes in the Grampians, Italy, Germany and Gibraltar.[67]

The fact that Ashoka felt that such a policy was feasible suggests that the Axial virtues of compassion and *ahimsa* had taken firm root, even if they could never be fully implemented by a politician. Ashoka may sincerely have believed that violence simply bred more violence, and that slaughter and conquest could only backfire. His *dhamma* was not specifically Buddhist but could appeal to any of the main schools. Ashoka probably hoped to promote a policy based on consensus, which could bind the subjects of his far-flung empire together. The *dhamma* did not mention the uniquely Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* ("no self") or the practice of yoga, but concentrated on the virtues of kindness and benevolence.[68] "There is no gift comparable to the gift of *dhamma* . . . the sharing of *dhamma*," Ashoka wrote in the Eleventh Major Rock Edict. This consisted of

> good behaviour towards slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, generosity towards friends, acquaintances and relatives, and towards renouncers and brahmins, and abstention from killing living beings. Father, son, brother, master, friend, acquaintance, relative and neighbour should say "this is good, this we shall do." By doing so, there is gain in this world and in the next there is infinite merit through the gift of *dhamma*.[69]

Far from imposing Buddhism on his subjects, the edicts insisted that there must be no religious chauvinism. Brahmins were to be honored as well as those renouncers who rejected the Vedic system. The king "honours all sects and both ascetics and laymen with gifts and recognition," reads the Twelfth Major Rock Edict. "The advancement of the essential doctrines of all the rest" was of the greatest importance. Nobody must disparage anybody else's

teaching. In this way, all the different schools could flourish. "Concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another's principles."[20]

Ashoka was a realist. He did not outlaw violence; there were occasions when it might be unavoidable—if, for example, the forest dwellers stirred up trouble. Capital punishment remained an option. But Ashoka did cut down on the consumption of meat in his household and listed birds, animals, and fish that could not be hunted. It was a brave experiment, but it failed. During the last ten years of his reign, Ashoka made no new inscriptions, and his vast empire may already have been falling apart. After his death in 231, the *dhamma* lapsed. Social tensions and sectarian conflicts set in, and the empire began to disintegrate. It has been suggested that Ashoka's preoccupation with nonviolence emasculated the army and made the state vulnerable to invasion, but Ashoka was never doctrinaire about *ahimsa*. It is more likely that the empire simply outgrew its resources. Ashoka was never forgotten. In Buddhist tradition, he is a *chakkavatti*, a universal king whose reign turned the wheel of law. Later leaders, such as Guru Nanek, founder of Sikhism, and Mahatma Gandhi, would revive the ideal of concord and unity across sectarian and social divides.

After Ashoka's death, India entered a dark age. Even though a number of documents survived, we have little reliable information about the kingdoms and dynasties that rose and fell during these centuries of political instability, which lasted until the accession of the Gupta dynasty in 320 CE. But we do know that India experienced major spiritual change. During this time, Indian religion became theistic, and the people discovered God. The stark, aniconic religion of the Vedas and the renouncers, which had so drastically reduced the role of the gods, had given way to the Hindu extravaganza of brilliantly painted temples, colorful processions, popular pilgrimages, and devotion to the images of a multitude of exotic deities.

The first sign of this development can be seen in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, the teachings of "the Sage with the white mule," which was probably composed in the late fourth century. Traditional Vedic religion had never been very visual. Even in

their heyday, nobody had been particularly interested in what Indra or Vishnu had looked like. People had experienced the divine in chants and mantras, not in statues and icons. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad is strongly influenced by the teachings of Samkhya yoga, an originally atheistic school, but here brahman, the absolute reality, was identified with the personalized god Rudra/Shiva, and it was he who would liberate the yogin from the painful cycle of samsara. When he achieved this *moksha*, the enlightened yogin would *see* the deity within himself.

This was probably not a complete innovation. Vedic religion had been practiced and promoted by the upper classes, but it is possible that ordinary worshipers had always made images of the gods in perishable materials that did not survive.[71] By the end of the Axial Age, this popular faith, which may have existed continuously ever since the days of the Indus Valley civilization, had begun to fuse with the sophisticated practices of the sages. In the Rig Veda, Rudra was a very marginal god. Now, merged with the indigenous god Shiva, he had come to the foreground as the personalized embodiment of brahman and the Lord of the universe, who made himself known to his devotees in the practice of yoga. The yogin could break the bonds of samsara only by becoming one with the Lord, the ruler of nature and the self (atman): "When he comes to know God, he is freed from all fetters. . . . By meditating on him, by striving toward him, and further in the end by becoming the same reality as him, all illusion disappears."[72] All impediments fell away, and at the moment of death the self was indissolubly united to Lord Rudra.

The Lord was not simply a transcendent being but lived within the self, in rather the same way as the form (*murti*) of fire was potentially present in wood: we could not see it until the friction of the fire drill caused the flame to blaze forth. The Lord resided within us like oil in sesame seeds or butter in curds. Meditation brought the yogin into direct contact with "the true nature of the *brahman*," which was no longer an impersonal reality, but the "unborn, unchanging" Rudra, the mountain dweller.[73] He was even "higher than *brahman*, the immense one hidden in all beings, in each according to its kind, and who alone encompasses the

whole universe."[76] Yet Rudra was also "the size of a thumb," hiding within the self.[75] Meditation had enabled the yogin to see the god's physical form (*murti*) in the deeper regions of his personality.

To create a coherent theistic vision, the Shvetashvatara Upanishad drew upon a number of diverse spiritualities: on the Upanishadic notion of the identity of brahman and atman, on the concepts of rebirth and *moksha*, on Samkhya, yoga, and the chanting of the sacred syllable Om. It joined all these a-theistic disciplines with the image of the creator god. In later, classical Hinduism, this synthesis would create a new theology, which could be applied to any deity, not merely to Rudra/Shiva. The specific identity of the Lord in question was less important than the fact that he had become accessible in meditation. The yogin knew that this god existed, not because of a set of metaphysical proofs, but because he had seen him.

In the very last verse of the Shvetashvatara, we find an important new word. The Upanishad explained that the liberation it described would shine forth "only in a man who has the deepest love [*bhakti*] for God and who shows the same love towards his teacher."[76] A religious revolution was afoot. People who felt excluded from the abstruse mysticism of the Upanishads and the world-renouncing ascetics were beginning to create a spirituality that suited their way of life. They wanted to participate in the insights of the Axial Age, but needed a less abstract and more emotive religion. So they developed the notion of *bhakti* ("devotion") to a deity who loved and cared for his worshipers.[77] The central act of *bhakti* was self-surrender: devotees stopped resisting the Lord and, conscious of their helplessness, were confident that their god would help them.

The word *bhakti* is complex. Some scholars believe that it comes from *bharij*, "separation": people became aware of a gulf between them and the divine, and yet, at the same time, the god of their choice slowly detached himself from the cosmos he created and confronted them, person to person. Other scholars believe that the word relates to *bhaj*—to share, participate in—as the yogin in the Shvetashvatara becomes one with Lord Rudra. At this

stage *bhakti* was still in its infancy. A crucial text was the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which—some scholars believe—was written during the late third century. It developed the theology of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, taking it in a new direction that had a profound effect on the Hindu spirituality that emerged during the dark age.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* ("The Song of the Lord") may originally have been a separate text, but at some point it was inserted into the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*. It takes the form of a dialogue between Arjuna, the greatest warrior of the Pandava brothers, and his friend Krishna. The terrible war that Yudishthira, Arjuna's eldest brother, had hoped to avoid was about to begin. Standing in his war chariot, with Krishna as his driver, Arjuna gazed in horror at the battlefield. Until this point in the story, Arjuna had been less disturbed than Yudishthira about the prospect of war, but now he was struck by the enormity of what was about to happen. The family was tragically divided against itself; the Pandavas were about to attack their kinsfolk. According to ancient teaching, a warrior who killed his relatives consigned the entire family to hell. He would rather give up the kingdom than slaughter his brave cousins and his beloved teachers Bhishma and Drona. There would be anarchy; the social order would be destroyed. If he was responsible for the death of his cousins, he would never know happiness again, and evil would haunt the Pandavas for the rest of their lives. "What use to us is kingship, delights, or life itself," he asked Krishna.[78] It would be far more glorious to be killed in battle, unarmed, and offering no resistance.

Saying this in the time of war
Arjuna slumped into his chariot
And laid down his bow and arrows
His mind tormented with grief.[79]

The *Bhagavad-Gita* was one of the last great texts of the Axial Age, and it marks a moment of religious transition. As so often in our story, a new religious insight was inspired by revulsion from violence. Krishna tried to put some heart into Arjuna by citing all the traditional arguments for war. The warriors who fell in the

coming battle would not really die, he said, because the atman was eternal; and since a warrior who died in battle would go straight to heaven, Arjuna would be doing his cousins a favor. If he refused to fight, Arjuna could be accused of cowardice and, more seriously, would violate the dharma of the *kshatriya* class. As a warrior it was his sacred duty to fight. It was required of him by the gods, by the divine order of the universe, and by society. Like his brother Yudishthira, Arjuna was facing the tragic dilemma of the *kshatriya* dharma. The emperor Ashoka had been committed to nonviolence but he could not decommission his army. Brahmin priests could abjure warfare; renouncers could turn their backs on the whole sorry mess and take refuge in the forest. But somebody had to defend the community, and to preserve law and order. That, most unfortunately, would mean fighting, if only in self-defense. How could a warrior do his sacred duty to society without incurring the bad effects of the violent karma that he was forced to commit?

Arjuna was not impressed by Krishna's first set of arguments. "I will not fight!" he insisted.[80] Warfare on this scale must be wrong. It could not be right to shed blood for worldly gain. Perhaps he should become a renouncer? But he respected Krishna, and turned back to him in desperation, begging for his help. In agreeing to be Arjuna's guru, Krishna had the difficult job of countering the arguments of the Jains, the Buddhists, and those ascetics who believed that all worldly action was incompatible with liberation. But this meant that the vast majority had no hope of salvation. Arjuna had put his finger on a major flaw of the Indian Axial Age. Krishna wanted him to consider the problem from a different perspective, but instead of proposing a wholly new teaching that canceled out the other schools, he attempted a new synthesis of the old spiritual disciplines with the new concept of *bhakti*.

Krishna proposed that Arjuna practice an alternative kind of yoga: karma-yoga. He made a shocking suggestion: even a warrior who was fighting a deadly battle could achieve *moksha*. To achieve this, he had to dissociate himself from the effect of his action—in this case the battle, and the death of his kinsfolk. Like any yogin, the

man of action (karma) must give up desire. He could not permit himself to lust after the fame, wealth, or power that would result from the military campaign. It was not the actions themselves that bound human beings to the endless round of rebirth, but attachment to the fruits of these deeds. The warrior must perform his duty without hope of personal gain, showing the same detachment as a yogin:

Be intent on action
Not on the fruits of action;
Avoid attraction to the fruits
And attachment to inaction!

Perform actions, firm in discipline,
Relinquishing attachment;
Be impartial to failure and success—
This equanimity is called discipline.[81]

But greed and ambition were deeply rooted in human consciousness, so the warrior could achieve this state of dispassion only by the exercise of yoga, which would dismantle his ego. The warrior must take the "me" and "mine" out of his deeds, so that he acted quite impersonally. Once he had achieved this, he would in fact be "inactive," because "he" would not be taking part in the war: "always content, independent, he does nothing at all even when he engages in action."[82] A *kshatriya* had responsibilities; he could not simply retire to the forest. But by practicing karma-yoga he would in fact be detached from the world, even while he was living and active in it. Krishna instructed Arjuna in the usual yogic disciplines, but the meditation he proposed was tailor-made for the *kshatriya,* who could not spend hours every day in contemplation. There was a more exacting form of meditation for a professional ascetic, but karma-yoga could be performed by a man or woman who had worldly duties. The traditional yoga had never centered on a god, but karma-yoga did. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad had instructed

the yogin to focus on Rudra/Shiva, but Krishna told Arjuna that he must meditate on Vishnu.

Krishna had a surprise for Arjuna. He explained that he, Krishna, was not only the son of Vishnu, but he actually was the god in human form. Even though he was "unborn, undying, the Lord of creatures," Vishnu had descended into a human body many times. Vishnu was the creator of the world and kept it in being, but whenever there was a serious crisis—"whenever sacred duty decays and chaos prevails"—he created an earthly form for himself and came into the world:

> *To protect men of virtue*
> *And destroy men who do evil*
> *To set the standard of sacred duty,*
> *I appear in age after age.*[84]

Now that he had imparted this astonishing news, Krishna could speak more openly to Arjuna about the devotion of *bhakti*. Arjuna could learn how to detach himself from his egocentric desires by imitating Krishna himself. As Lord and Ruler of the world, Krisha/Vishnu was continually active, but his deeds (*karman*) did not damage him:

> *These actions do not bind me,*
> *Since I remain detached*
> *In all my actions, Arjuna,*
> *As if I stood apart from them.*[85]

But if he wanted to imitate Krishna, Arjuna had to understand the nature of divinity; he had to *see* Krishna/Vishnu as he truly was.

Right there on the battlefield, Krishna revealed his divine nature to Arjuna, who was aghast and filled with terror when he saw his friend's eternal form as the god Vishnu, creator and destroyer, to whom all beings must return. He saw Krishna transfigured by the divine radiance, which contained the entire cosmos. "I see the gods in your body!" he cried.

I see your boundless form
Everywhere,
The countless arms,
Bellies, mouths, and eyes;
Lord of all,
I see no end,
Or middle or beginning
To your totality.[86]

Everything—human or divine—was somehow present in the body of Krishna, who filled space and included within himself all possible forms of deity: "howling storm gods, sun gods, bright gods, and gods of ritual." But Krishna/Vishnu was also "man's tireless spirit," the essence of humanity.[87] All things rushed toward him, as rivers roiled toward the sea and moths were drawn inexorably into a blazing flame. And there too Arjuna saw the Pandava and Kaurava warriors, all hurtling into the god's blazing mouths.

Arjuna had thought that he had known Krishna through and through, but now, "Who are you?" he cried in bewilderment. "I am Time grown old," Krishna replied—time, which set the world in motion and also annihilated it. Krishna/Vishnu was eternal; he transcended the historical process. As destroyer, Krishna/Vishnu had *already* annihilated the armies that were apparently drawing up their battle lines, even though, from Arjuna's human perspective, the fighting had not even begun. The outcome was fixed and immutable. In order to keep the cosmos in being, one age must succeed another. The war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas would bring the heroic era to an end, and inaugurate a new historical epoch. "Even without you," Krishna told Arjuna, "all these warriors arrayed in hostile ranks will cease to exist."

They are already
Killed by me.
Be just my instrument,
The archer at my side.[88]

Arjuna, therefore, must go into the battle, and play the role allotted to him in restoring dharma to the world.

It was a perplexing vision. Krishna's teaching seemed to absolve human beings of any responsibility for the carnage they committed. Too many politicians and warriors have insisted that they were simply the instruments of destiny, and used this to justify horrendous acts. But few have emptied themselves of the desire for personal gain that, Krishna insisted, was essential. Only the disciplined action of the warrior-yogin could bring order to a destructive world. Krishna seemed pitiless, and yet, he told Arjuna, he was a savior god, who could rescue those who loved him from the ill effects of their karma. Only people of *bhakti* could see Krishna's true nature, and this devotion required complete self-surrender:

> *Acting only for me, intent on me,*
> *Free from attachment,*
> *Hostile to no creature, Arjuna,*
> *A man of devotion can come to me.*[89]

Detachment and indifference were the first steps toward the union with God, which could save human beings from all the suffering of life.[90]

The *Bhagavad-Gita* has probably been more influential than any other Indian scripture. Its great merit was its accessibility. Where other spiritualities confined salvation to a few gifted, heroic ascetics, this was a religion for everybody. Very few people had the time or talent to dedicate their lives to yoga. Not many could renounce their family and take themselves off to the forest. But "if they rely on me, Arjuna," Krishna promised, "women, vaishyas, shudras, even men born in the womb of evil, reach the highest way."[91] Anybody could love and imitate the Lord, and learn to transcend selfishness in the ordinary duties of daily life. Even a warrior, whose dharma obliged him to kill, could practice karma-yoga. After the great epiphany, Krishna explained that the whole material world was a battlefield in

which mortal beings struggle for enlightenment with the weapons of detachment, humility, nonviolence, honesty, and self-restraint.[92] The *Bhagavad-Gita* did not negate the spirituality of the Axial Age but instead had made it possible for everybody to practice it.